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Theology of time

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Interfaith matters

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‘Rediscovering justice’

by Julian Gotobed

Fifty years ago, an assassin killed Martin Luther King Jr—the African-American Baptist pastor who became a prominent leader in the American Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s—on 4 April 1968.¹ This anniversary of his death has occasioned a range of events and reflections in 2018, informed by his life, ministry, and message. Christian Aid organised ‘Rediscovering Justice’, a national service at Westminster Abbey, and a Symposium at St Margaret’s Church, London, on 4 April. A rarely seen documentary about King’s public ministry, *King: A Filmed Record...From Montgomery to Memphis*² is also on re-release and accessible to the public in its original version for the first time since 1970.³ Various British media outlets⁴ reported the anniversary of King’s death and considered his impact,⁵ and *The Baptist Times* included several pieces to commemorate King’s demise.⁶ This article is an expanded version of a paper presented at the ‘Rediscovering Justice’ Symposium. It focuses on the theology at the heart of King’s commitment to seeking justice and outlines some implications for Christians today.

Why bother with King, five decades after his death? James McClendon, a Baptist theologian and contemporary of King, proposes in *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology*⁷ that some Christian lives merit careful attention, because the beliefs they embody enable the church to reform its theology to be ‘more faithful to our ancient vision, and more adequate to the age now being born’.⁸ King is one such life in McClendon’s estimate.⁹ King constituted a prophetic challenge to church and society in the US that embodied the call and cost of the gospel. He presented an uncomfortable critique of poverty, racism, and militarism;¹⁰ he spoke truth to power. The initiatives in 2018 that remembered King and his death, including this paper, concur with McClendon’s assessment of him. His legacy continues to inspire people in the 21st century to think about, commit to, and work for justice.

McClendon explores the potential of some Christian lives to provoke self-examination and reform in fellow believers. ‘By recognising that Christian beliefs...are living convictions that give shape to actual lives and actual communities, we open ourselves to the possibility that the only relevant critical examination of Christian beliefs may be one that begins by attending to lived lives’.¹¹ The identification of the most deeply held beliefs or convictions in individuals and communities is the starting point for McClendon’s approach to theology. It serves as the springboard to his own appraisal of King’s life¹² and to my own examination.¹³

Joshua Searle gets to the substance of McClendon's notion of the beliefs most important to us, when he observes, 'Convictions are a matter of habit induced, conscience forming, inarticulate, and pre-critical assumptions concerning the deepest issues of life, faith and meaning'.¹⁴ The 'inarticulate' and 'pre-critical' nature of our convictions means discovering them is not straightforward. Yet, to discern our convictions is to see ourselves for who we are in the clearest way possible; it can be a disorienting experience, especially if we detect contradictions within ourselves. For McClendon, 'A conviction is a persistent belief such that if X (a person or a community) has a conviction it will not be easily abandoned, and it cannot be abandoned without making X a significantly different person or community than before'.¹⁵ McClendon's concept of a conviction shapes his definition of theology, 'It is the discovery, understanding or interpretation, the transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another **and to whatever else there is**'.¹⁶ He invites us to identify, interpret, and transform our convictions in the light of the convictions embodied in tangible lives, where those lives point us faithfully to the gospel.¹⁷ Paying attention to King's theological convictions assists us to scrutinise our own, test them, and correct them, where necessary, when it is apparent some aspect of the gospel is missing or distorted. He can enable us to identify where justice has been forgotten or neglected. King can help us 'Rediscover Justice'.

King's core theological convictions cluster around three broad themes: God, humanity, and love-justice. The seeds of these convictions arose in the soil of King's experience of the black Baptist church tradition in the segregated society of the South.¹⁸ In black Baptist religion, the biblical narrative, especially the Old Testament story of the Exodus, interpreted the black experience of oppression and inspired hope for liberation.¹⁹ King's exposure to Liberal Protestant theology in the North at Crozer Theological Seminary, Pennsylvania, and Boston University School of Theology, Massachusetts, tested, refined, and enlarged the convictions forged in his experience of black Baptist culture growing up in the South.²⁰

Convictions about God

King considered personal language to be adequate for talking about God intellectually and experientially. The preaching of the black Baptist church he grew up in drew strength from the Old Testament witness to a personal God. The story of creation is clear: God makes all human beings in the image of God, including black people. God imbues all human lives with a sacred dignity that means they are precious to God. The (white) world might tell a black person she is a 'nobody' but God always sees a black person as a 'somebody'. The story of Israel's redemption from captivity and oppression in Egypt described a personal God on the side of justice that intervened to set the people of Israel free and still acts on the side of justice and the oppressed in the present.

At Crozer Theological Seminary, King encountered the ideas of influential US liberal Protestant theologians such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr and Edgar Brightman.²¹ King pursued doctoral studies at Boston University, attracted to the philosophy of personalism associated with the School of Theology. Personality is the basic category of reality according to personalism.²² King's embrace of this philosophical perspective reinforced the theological convictions formed in his black church experience. In *Stride Toward Freedom*, King's account of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he offers the following description of his intellectual development:

*I studied philosophy and theology at Boston University under Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf. Both men greatly stimulated my thinking. It was mainly under these teachers that I studied personalistic philosophy—the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality. This personal idealism remains today my basic philosophical position. Personalism's insistence that only personality—finite and infinite—is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.*²³

King's doctoral thesis compared the theologies of Paul Tillich and Henry Wieman.²⁴ Both eschew personal notions of God. He concludes that the approaches of Tillich and Wieman are unsatisfactory. In his view, a personal God is necessary to account for fellowship between God and human beings and to explain God's goodness:

*The religious man has always recognised two fundamental religious values. One is fellowship with God, the other is trust in his goodness. Both of these imply the personality of God. No fellowship is possible without freedom and intelligence. There may be interactions between impersonal beings, but not fellowship. True fellowship and communion can exist only between beings who know each other and take a volitional attitude toward each other.*²⁵

*God's personality is also the presupposition of his goodness. There can be no goodness in the true ethical sense without freedom and intelligence. Only a personal being can be good...Goodness in the true sense of the word is an attribute of personality.*²⁶

King's doctoral thesis made the intellectual case for a personal God. The ensuing five years of public ministry in the cause of civil rights for black Americans impressed upon him the experiential grounds for asserting God is personal. In 'Pilgrimage to Nonviolence', his contribution to *The Christian Century* series *How My Mind Has Changed*, King reflects:

In recent months I have become more and more convinced of the reality of a personal God. True, I have always believed in the personality of God. But in past years the idea of a personal God was little more than a metaphysical category which I found theologically and philosophically satisfying. Now it is a living reality that has been

*validated in the experiences of everyday life.*²⁷

To affirm God is personal is not to infer that God is simply an individual human person writ large. God is no 'Big Man in the sky':

*To say God is personal is not to make him an object among objects or to attribute to him the finiteness and limitations of human personality; it is to take what is finest and noblest in our consciousness and affirm its perfect existence in him. It is certainly true that human personality is limited, but personality as such involves no necessary limitations. It simply means self-consciousness and self-direction.*²⁸

Moreover, since God is personal God is on the side of justice:

*I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship. Behind the harsh appearances of the world is a benign power.*²⁹

King demonstrates a keen sense of a personal God accompanying him on the difficult journey to justice. God is the author of hope in King's life and the message he proclaimed. The same God is still on the side of justice and a companion to those seeking what is right and equitable here and now. A firm conviction, both intellectual and experiential, that God is with those who seek what is right in the face of misunderstanding, hostility, and great obstacles can be a potent source of comfort and inspiration today, as it was for King in the US of the 1950s and 1960s.

Convictions about humanity

King believes passionately that human beings reflect a sacred dignity. In *The Ethical Demands of Integration* he alludes to the Genesis account of humankind:

*There must be a recognition of the sacredness of human personality. Deeply rooted in our political and religious heritage is the conviction that every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth. Our Hebraic-Christian tradition refers to this inherent dignity of man in the Biblical term the image of God. This innate worth referred to in the phrase the image of God is universally shared in equal portions by all men. There is no graded scale of essential worth; there is no divine right of one race which differs from the divine right of another. Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator.*³⁰

Since God is personal, loves human persons, and makes human beings in God's image, all people are intrinsically valuable and important to God. We are required to see the other as sacred and imbued with dignity before God. King demonstrated courtesy and firmness in his dealings with others. He refused to 'demonise' those that were 'other' or different to him in church and society. In these days of anger and polarisation followers

of Jesus can learn much from King about how to think of others and how to engage with them. It is inappropriate, indeed, incompatible with the gospel, to stigmatise those that are different to us in physical appearance, culture, language, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or national identity.

King is realistic in his assessment of human nature. He affirms the Christian theological category of sin that describes human rebellion towards God and signifies a power that holds humankind captive:

*The more I observed the tragedies of history and man's shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin. My reading of the works of Reinhold Niebuhr made me aware of the complexity of human motives and the reality of sin on every level of man's existence. Moreover, I came to recognize the complexity of man's social involvement and the glaring reality of collective evil.*³¹

King recognises a social dimension to human existence. Complex social structures and social movements shape human life. Consequently, he engages in theological and sociological critiques of poverty, racism, and militarism to expose their interconnection and the inequalities rife in each. King is critical of both capitalism and communism.³² To him, "...communism is a judgement against our failure to make democracy real...Our only hope today lies in our ability to...go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism".³³ King provoked severe criticism, when he openly challenged the US's military action in Vietnam in a sermon entitled *A Time to Break Silence*, delivered at the Riverside Church, New York, in 1967, where he analysed the connections between capitalism, racism, and militarism. King employed sophisticated social analysis to understand the social context in which he practised ministry. King's deployment of sociological and theological categories to analyse church and society informed his message and strategy in the pursuit of justice. His approach challenges the contemporary church to engage with the concrete reality of the society it inhabits, whether in the US or the UK. We cannot be content with fixating mainly on abstract paradigms of cultural analysis like postmodernity and post-christendom.

Convictions about love and justice

King is notable for holding love and justice together from the outset of his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.³⁴ At the launch of the Montgomery Improvement Association on 5 December 1955, he made this dual commitment explicit:

*I want to tell you this evening that it is not enough to talk about love. Love is one of the principal parts of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice...Justice is love correcting that which would work against love...Standing beside love is always justice.*³⁵

King's concept of love was rooted in his reading of the New Testament through the lens

of the Swedish scholar Anders Nygren's account of love, *Agape and Eros*.³⁶ It is an uncomfortable, disruptive, inconvenient, and far from sentimental idea of love. Nygren argues that Agape refers to God's love. King captures this sense when he contends Agape is, '...creative, redemptive, goodwill to all men...It is the love of God operating in the human heart'.³⁷ King insists that human beings are required to exhibit Agape love, too. 'Agape is disinterested love. It is a love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbour...It is love in action. Agape is love seeking to create and preserve community'.³⁸ For King, God seeks out his enemies in Christ to bring them near. Those called to follow Christ must do the same. Agape love was a contentious concept for many in the black population in America that listened to King, because it seemed to demand a higher ethical standard in thought and deed on the part of a black person compared to a white person. For King, Agape love is not an excuse for white people to avoid self-examination or a license to do nothing to correct injustice. King's message to white pastors in his 'Letter from Birmingham City Jail' is as pertinent today as a critique of complacency and a call to seek justice as it was in 1963.³⁹

*Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were a "colony of heaven," and had to obey God rather than man...Things are different now. The contemporary church is often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are...But the judgement of God is upon the church as never before. If the church today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. I am meeting young people every day whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust.*⁴⁰

The church in every generation needs to consider an awkward possibility. Does the surrounding culture so entwine us that we struggle to recognise injustice when it is crouching on our doorstep and festering untroubled in our backyard? The Windrush scandal, Grenfell Tower, clergy misconduct, economic inequality, and 'post-truth' politics surely give pause for thought.

Conclusion

To finish, let us consider a statue and a sculpture. Ten statues commemorate ten 20th century Christian martyrs, including King, at Westminster Abbey in niches above the West Gate. To depict King in stone on Westminster Abbey is not without irony. Jesse Jackson wryly observes, 'They loved him as a martyr after he was killed but rejected him as a marcher when he was alive'.⁴¹ The prophet becomes popular with hindsight, when it is

clear he stood on the right side of history before everyone else. Domesticating dissent,⁴² as Curtis Freeman notes, is a perennial temptation for subsequent generations to resist.

On Marsh Plaza, at the heart of Boston University's campus, stands a sculpture, inspired by King's *I Have a Dream* speech. It consists of 50 iron doves joined together in the appearance of motion, ascending, like a flock of birds, skywards. It depicts an important conviction in King's life. When our purposes and priorities converge with God's purposes and priorities then we participate in a movement permeated with God's love and grace. We experience what James Forbes calls, 'a rising situation'.⁴³

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Notes to text

1. David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1988 [first published 1986].
2. See: <https://www.kinolorber.com/film/view/id/1288> [accessed 30/08/18].
3. Four screenings of *Montgomery to Memphis*, a documentary that traces the development of King's role in the Civil Rights Movement, organised by the Sam Sharpe Project and Tipping Point North South at Baptist venues, https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/524423/Rarely_seen_MLK.aspx [accessed 30/08/18].
4. On 4 April 2018, the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme played Martin Luther King Jr's final speech, delivered on the evening before his assassination in which he anticipated his death.
5. *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/mar/30/martin-luther-king-50th-anniversary-death-events-planned> [accessed 11/08/18]; Gary Younge, 'Martin Luther King: How a Rebel Leader was Lost to History' *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/04/martin-luther-king-how-a-rebel-leader-was-lost-to-history> [accessed 30/08/18].
6. *The Baptist Times*, https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/518950/_Martin_Luther.aspx [accessed 30/08/18].
7. James Wm. McClendon Jr, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002.
8. McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, p22.
9. McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, pp47-66.
10. McClendon lost two tenured posts because he supported the Civil Rights Movement and opposed the Vietnam War. James Wm. McClendon Jr, 'The Radical Road One Baptist Took' in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, LLXIV/4, Oct 2000, <https://www.goshen.edu/mqr/2000/12/october-2000-mcclendon/> [accessed 30/08/18].
11. McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, p22.
12. McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, pp47-66.
13. McClendon is concerned primarily to demonstrate the origins of King's thought in his southern black Baptist experience growing up. My exposition concentrates on King's theological convictions articulated in his public ministry 1955-68.
14. Joshua T. Searle, *Theology After Christendom: Forming Prophets for a Post-Christian World*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018, p171.
15. James Wm. McClendon Jr, *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. I. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, p22.
16. McClendon, *Ethics*, p23. The emphasis in bold appears in the original.

17. For McClendon, studying the convictions embedded in human lives must be seen against the backdrop of the witness of Scripture. McClendon, *Ethics*, 17-44.
18. Gary Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Social Gospel*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2018, pp255-259; Lewis V. Baldwin, *The Voice of Conscience: The Church in the Mind of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp13-50.
19. McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, pp60-66.
20. Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy*, pp259-281.
21. Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy*, p262.
22. Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson, 'Personalism' Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Edward N. Zalta (ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/personalism/> [accessed 3/09/18].
23. Martin Luther King Jr, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010, p88 [first published 1958].
24. Martin Luther King Jr, *A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman*. PhD, Boston University, 1955. http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol02Scans/339_15-April-1955_A%20Comparison%20of%20the%20Conceptions%20of%20God.pdf [accessed 30/08/18].
25. King, *A Comparison*, p512.
26. King, *A Comparison*, p513.
27. James Melvin Washington (ed), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986, p40.
28. Washington, p40.
29. Washington, p40.
30. Washington, pp118-119.
31. Washington, pp35-36.
32. Washington, pp629-630.
33. Washington, p242.
34. James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991, pp61-66.
35. Martin Luther King Jr, 'Address to the Initial Mass Meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association' Tape Recording (5 December 1955) quoted in James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, p62.
36. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (trans Philip S. Watson). London: SPCK, 1982 [first combined volume 1953].
37. Washington, p46.
38. Washington, p19-20.
39. Washington, pp289-302.
40. Washington, p300.
41. David Smith, 'Martin Luther King: Jesse Jackson on a killing that "redefined America"' *The Guardian*, March 31, 2018.
42. Curtis W. Freeman, *Undomesticated Dissent: Democracy and the Public Virtue of Religious Nonconformity*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017, pp1-37.
43. James Forbes, 'Hannah Rose' 30 Good Minutes: *Chicago Evening Club* (6 Nov 1988). <http://www.30goodminutes.org/index.php/archives/23-member-archives/299-james-forbes-program-3206> [accessed 2/03/18].